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Debate urged on growth of Soviet power

By Tom Diaz
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A top Pentagon intelligence official yesterday defended the administration's grim assessment of growing Soviet military power and called for a public debate on the implications of that threat.

"The information, the data is there for the debate to take place," said A. Denis Clift, deputy director for external affairs at the Defense Intelligence Agency. "But ... the American public has to want it to take place."

Speaking at a breakfast meeting of the American Bar Association standing committee on law and national security, Mr. Clift outlined his agency's assessment of mushrooming Soviet military power and defended its accuracy.

"The government believes that its figures are facts," he said.

He pointed to marked growth during the last decade in every area of Soviet military strength, from intercontinental ballistics missiles and conventional offensive weapons to strategic defense programs similar to the administration's proposed Strategic Defense Initiative.

"Too often we focus on one aspect of the Soviet Union's military power without taking the time to stand back and look at the range of Soviet developments," he said, warning that the United States "should be concerned with what the Soviets are doing in defense and strategic defense" as well as offensive weapons.

"The Soviets devote as much treasure and as much energy to strategic defensive forces as they do to strategic offensive forces," he said.

Those efforts include creation of a "heavily layered" system of satellites, radars and advanced missile interceptors that is giving the Soviets "the capability to develop a national antiballistics missile (ABM) defense should they choose to do so."

Deployment of such a defense would violate the 1972 ABM treaty.

Soviet defensive efforts also involve the dedication of tens of thousands of

scientists and engineers to the research and development of laser and directed energy systems — like the U.S. SDI program, against which Soviet leaders have complained vigorously.

On arms control, Mr. Clift said, "We are dedicated as a government to reaching agreement with the Soviets in the categories of arms control negotiations we have underway."

Those categories — on the table at ongoing bilateral arms talks between the two nations at Geneva — include strategic defense programs such as SDI and the comparable Soviet effort, strategic and intermediate range nuclear forces, and conventional forces.

But, he added, when the overall picture is assessed, there are "asymmetries" in favor of the Soviet Union, and "that is what we are trying to address" in the negotiations.

Although most of the material Mr. Clift discussed has been released by the Defense Department — principally in the latest edition of its annual book, "Soviet Military Power," of which he is said to be the lead author — many of the lawyers and business executives to whom he

spoke appeared to be surprised and concerned by the developments.

"The silence was deafening after you finished speaking," one member of the audience told Mr. Clift.

Mr. Clift declined to directly answer questions raised by others — including Accuracy in Media's Board Chairman Reed Irvine — about whether the news media, particularly television networks, are accurately conveying information such as that he presented yesterday, and, if not, what the administration should do about it.

"It is inappropriate for me to try to speak for [the] entire administration on ... moving to reach out to the networks,"

he said. "That is not part of the mission of the DIA."

Among other "key developments" that he said currently concern U.S. officials are:

- "Vigorous" Soviet research, development and deployment of intercontinental ballistics missiles, while the United States continues to debate the future of its own aging ICBM force.

Mr. Clift ticked off a list of new and more accurate ICBMs being developed or deployed by the Soviet Union, pointing out that the Soviets are preparing to deploy their fifth generation of ICBMs while beginning research on a sixth generation.

Recent Soviet missile designs are mobile, he said, and the vast Soviet land mass would make it difficult to detect and strike missiles in a war.

- Continuing growth in the Soviet submarine and surface fleet. As in the case of ICBMs, the Soviet Union has developed several new generations of ballistic missile and attack submarines, Mr. Clift said. It has also moved aggressively to develop a "blue water" Navy capable of sustaining offensive operations far from the Soviet mainland.

- "The largest chemical warfare program in the world."

- Advances in manned strategic bombers and cruise missiles.

- Continuing production of vast amounts of conventional military hardware, including the manufacture of 3,200 main battle tanks a year, adding to the existing Soviet force of 52,000 such tanks.